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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 001334

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SUBJECT: Ravalomanana Leads in the Home Stretch

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 1324 AND PREVIOUS

B) ANTANANARIVO 001320

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the last stretch of the campaign season, only a handful of the 14 presidential candidates have any real hopes of making a showing in the December 3 polls. The five main contenders are waging all-out campaigns around the country, with incumbent President Ravalomanana in the lead in terms of national coverage. The remaining nine candidates have gambled away their modest public backing with cryptic messages and a joint statement of support for the renegade General Fidy. Ravalomanana's camp confidently declares that he will secure a first round victory, but the four main challengers seek to garner enough combined votes to deny the President an absolute majority and thus force a run-off. END SUMMARY.

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL
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2. (SBU) The competing campaign rallies held in Antananarivo over the past week were essentially "popularity contests," complete with musical guests and candidate-inspired paraphernalia. President Ravalomanana and Herizo Razafimahaleo drew the largest crowds, although Ravalomanana has a far larger following in Antananarivo. By contrast, the "Union of Candidates for the Defense of Legality and Democracy" recently formed by the eight candidates (including Ny Hasina Andriamanjato, Philippe Tsiranana, Pety Rakotoniaina, Pastor Daniel Rajakoba, General Ferdinand Razakarimanana, Monja Roindifo and Rakotonirina Manandafy) who supported General Fidy's botched coup attempt (REF A) had a disappointing turnout with supporters numbering in the low hundreds. The cryptic statements of the "Union" candidates may have been partly to blame. Wavering between boycotting, abstaining from or moving ahead with elections, the candidates agreed only on denouncing the legality of the December 3 election date and the election preparations. With such politically unsophisticated opponents, Ravalomanana's people are insisting the President will score a first-round victory, although challengers are hoping for a second round.

3. (U) President Ravalomanana has campaigned boldly in the centers of support of his most serious challengers. From Antananarivo he has now moved on to tackle the politically significant region of Fianarantsoa. There he aims to shift political support from three other candidates -- Pety Rakotoniaina, Herizo Razafimahaleo and Rakotonirina Manandafy -- who hail from this southern region.

SHIFTING ALLEGIANCES ON THE COAST?
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4. (U) The campaign heated up over the weekend in the traditional

opposition-stronghold of Toamasina (also known as Tamatave) on the east coast. President Ravalomanana and Mayor of Toamasina Roland Ratsiraka (nephew of former President Didier Ratsiraka) ran the same campaign circuit only a few days apart. Despite distribution of fliers threatening to set fire to the house of any Ravalomanana supporters, the President reportedly packed the stadium with promises to make Toamasina "the showcase of the Indian Ocean" and his development priority for the next five years. The surprising response the President received in the historical support base of the former ruling AREMA party may partly stem from some people's dissatisfaction with Ratsiraka's performance as mayor. Similarly, President Ravalomanana was greeted enthusiastically in the south western coastal town of Tulear, where candidate and former Speaker of the Assembly, Jean Lahiniriko has his base.

15. (SBU) To prevent coastal support from shifting toward the President, some candidates continue to play on the historical ethnic tension between those living on the coasts ("Cotier") and those living on the high plateau (including the dominant "Merina"). Embassy staff traveling in northern Madagascar in and around Diego Suarez (also known as Antsiranana) in the middle of the campaign encountered the long-standing local animosity to the Merina class, which includes President Ravalomanana. Several interlocutors dismissed the new roads, hospitals and schools to complain about jobs and inflation. Despite Ravalomanana spending his first campaign days in Diego Suarez, commentators said things like "he wants to kill coastal people," and blamed him for the drought. While this tension very much exists in coastal areas like Diego Suarez where hate of anything Merina runs strong, both Cotier and Merina people have expressed to us that politicians will be less successful in playing the ethnicity card this time around, in part because the Malagasy electorate is wiser to this kind of manipulation and in part because there has been more inter-ethnic mixing in recent years. In addition, those Malagasy earning a living, even indirectly, from tourism seem to support Ravalomanana

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strongly, both for his positive impact on this industry, in terms of infrastructure development, and for fear of the negative economic impact that would result if there is not a peaceful political continuation.

ELECTION PREPARATIONS IN HAND

16. (U) Madagascar will have around 15,000 election observers, nearly 200 of which are international. In addition to members of the diplomatic community already on the ground, international observers are starting to arrive in Antananarivo from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat and Parliamentary Forum, the African Union (AU), the Commission for the Indian Ocean (COI), the International Organization for the Francophonie (OIF), the European Union, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Norway, Switzerland, Japan and South Africa. The Ministry of Interior is optimistic that election preparations are well in hand, but international donors remain somewhat concerned about the margin of error in the electronic voter registration lists finalized on November 29.

MINISTER PUBLICLY REAFFIRMS PRESS FREEDOM

17. (U) In the wake of President Ravalomanana's controversial campaign speech, in which he lashed out at irresponsible journalists, the Minister of Communication met with the journalists' crisis committee formed November 19 (REF B) to reassure them that the GOM has no intention of muzzling or punishing the press. He affirmed that the President has suspended until further notice plans to increase sanctions in the penal code for journalists in violation of media regulations.

ELECTION-RELATED CRIME ON THE RISE?

18. (SBU) Post has received unconfirmed reports of allegedly election-related crime; no injuries or casualties were reported.

The homes of Ravalomanana supporters in Antananarivo and Toamasina were reportedly set on fire November 23. In an unrelated attack one day later, assailants launched grenades, none of which exploded, at a Tiko facility (the President's company) in Diego Suarez. General Fidy's camp has been quiet over the past week, but he remains at large and some contacts fear he may make another attempt to sabotage the election. In light of other election-related security incidents, Post will continue to monitor the security situation as elections approach.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) Ravalomanana's camp seems to be pushing hard for a decisive victory in the first round, although some observers note it could be in his political interest to aim for a second round in order to avoid the inevitable accusations of fraud if his total is barely above the 50 percent needed for a first round victory. Challenger Herizo Razafimahaleo -- who some now say is the President's main rival -- had a surprisingly strong showing over the weekend, but he has a long way to go to build on the four percent backing he received in the 2001 presidential election. Along with the other three main challengers, Norbert Ratsirahonana, Roland Ratsiraka, and Jean Lahiniriko, he will have to campaign hard to carve out support in a Ravalomanana-dominated campaign season. Our informal "polling" in the provinces suggests Ravalomanana is unpopular, except when compared to his 13 opponents. He also represents stability, which Malagasy crave above all else. Voter participation will represent a touchstone of Madagascar's democratic progress. Although some of President Ravalomanana's supporters fear voter abstention, Post generally expects good voter participation. END COMMENT.

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